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How a Terrorist Hijacking Was Set Up

Airplane hijackings make big headlines when they occur. But by the very nature of these terrorist operations, the planning that goes into them is secret.

We can now provide a rare, behind-the-scenes look at the preparations for a hijacking a little more than a year ago in which two Americans were murdered and two others tortured.

Sources at the Central Intelligence Agency have helped us piece together the nuts-and-bolts planning that led to the airborne piracy of Kuwait Airlines Flight 221 in December 1984. Here's how the plotters did it:

On Nov. 22, 1984, the four principal terrorists got together in Baalbek, the main city of the Bekaa Valley, in Syrian-controlled eastern Lebanon. They were: Mahmoud Nourani, the Iranian charge d'affaires in Lebanon; Sheik Sobhi Tofailli, commander of the military forces in Baalbek for the terrorist group Hezbollah; Hassan Hashem, pro-Iranian leader of Moslem militia units that control Beirut's International Airport, and Ali Al Yafi, Lebanese Shiite Moslem who had been chosen to lead the team of hijackers.

The targeted plane was an A310 Airbus scheduled to fly to Bangkok with stops at Dubai and Karachi. Al Yafi briefed his team on the configurations of the Airbus—the location of its exits, galleys and lavatories. Meanwhile, Iranian spies in Kuwait were sweeping airline reservation computers for names of any VIPs on Flight 221.

The hijacking was to occur before dawn on Nov. 27. Flight 221 would leave Kuwait the evening

before and take off from Dubai shortly after midnight. The terrorists were to leave Beirut on a Middle East Airlines flight the evening before and connect with Flight 221 in Dubai.

Their weapons, to be planted on board at Dubai, were two .25-cal. pistols (unlikely to pierce the airplane's hull unless fired point-blank) and a single hand grenade.

By the morning of Nov. 26, everything was set. Then the terrorists learned that three Kuwaiti diplomats and at least three Americans would be aboard the same Flight 221 a week later. This meant the hijackers would have six VIPs to be swapped for the 17 terrorists imprisoned in Kuwait whose release was the point of the hijacking. So the hijacking was postponed.

After prayers on the afternoon of Dec. 3, the hijackers were driven to Beirut airport to catch a Middle East Airlines flight to Dubai. They had no baggage and were driven directly to the plane, avoiding examination of their forged travel documents by Lebanese officials.

During the hour-long layover at Dubai waiting for Flight 221, the hijackers sat apart in the airport lounge, avoiding even eye contact. Al Yafi used the interval to shave off his beard. Then they quietly mingled with the other 14 passengers as they boarded the flight. Two were Iranians who later acted as spies for the terrorists, listening for hints of resistance among the passengers.

The hijacking lasted six days and led to the coldblooded murder of two U.S. aid officials. International pressure led Iran to stage a phony "rescue" as the plane sat at Tehran airport.